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ABSTRACT

Violence and advertising are the most visible of many issues receiving attention in the formulation of policy by governmental agencies, the television industry, and advocacy groups. The role in policy formulation of empirical research that identifies relationships between television viewing, individual thought, and behavior is growing in several areas: (1) television advertising and its influence on children, (2) evaluations of existing regulatory policies and of industry practices, (3) the causal hypothesis of viewing violence and viewer aggressiveness, (4) television's influence on voter decision-making, (5) the function and influence of entertainment in the lives of people, and (6) television's role in the lives of the young in developmental terms. Psychological research in such areas is one means by which we can obtain the knowledge necessary to shape television to the image we seek. (Author/DAG)

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PRIORITIES FOR ACTION-ORIENTED PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDIES OF TELEVISION AND BEHAVIOR

by

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PRIORITIES FOR ACTION-ORIENTED PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDIES OF TELEVISION AND BEHAVIOR

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There is currently unprecedented controversy over the performance of American television. The situation is in sharp contrast to a decade ago when the possibility of detrimental influence by television violence was consistently and confidently denied by industry spokesmen (Baker, 1969) and the propriety of directing advertising at children was unquestioned. Today, violence and advertising are only the most visible of the many issues receiving attention in the formulation of policy by government agencies, the television industry, and advocacy groups.

The television industry voluntarily reduced the time devoted to advertising on Saturday mornings when children dominate the audience and adopted the "family viewing" code that called for new restraint in regard to "sex and violence" during the two hours prior to 9 p.m. when the number of children in the evening audience is particularly sizable. These steps have not quieted the controversies. Advocacy groups want further and more varied restrictions on advertising; "family viewing" was overturned by a federal court on First Amendment grounds and the most recent data indicate that its demise was followed by an increase in the violence during those two hours (Gerbner and Gross, 1977).

The potential role in policy formulation of empirical research that identifies the relationships between television viewing and individual thought and behavior is great. In the past, social and behavioral science has not been prominent in the proceedings of the

Federal Communications Commission and the Federal Trade Commission. The emergence of new issues and an increasing demand for empirical validation of the success of policies suggest a greater role in the future. Outside of federal regulation, in the self-regulatory procedures of the industry and the decisionmaking of those who would advocate reforms, there are numerous opportunities for important contributions by psychological research.

A NEW ISSUE

The most prominent of new issues is television advertising and children. The threat of regulation is quite real, for the concensus of legal opinion is that advertising does not enjoy First Amendment protection equivalent to that afforded news and entertainment (Comstock, 1977). Pioneering research has begun to explore the degree to which children comprehend the commercial as a calculated attempt to persuade, the importance of television as a source of their knowledge about products, and the manner in which their exposure to commercials enters into family communication and decisionmaking (Ward, Wackman, and Wartella, 1977). It has found that concentrated televised sales campaigns can overcome children's initial defenses and reorder their preferences for products on which they are acknowledged experts -- toys (Rossiter and Robertson, 1974). It suggests that when a genre of product, such as over-the-counter drugs and proscribed narcotics, exposure to commercials in behalf of the licit component will not increase illicit consumption (Milavsky, Pekowsky, and Stipp, 1976). And it cautions that disclosures and warnings that are comprehensible to most adults may not be understood by children (Liebert et al., 1977). However, as the recent state-of-the-art survey sponsored by the National Science Foundation makes clear (Adler, 1977), many questions are uninvestigated and the remainder have not been fully addressed.

REGULATORY APPLICATIONS

The justification for regulatory action is performance by the broadcasting industry in the public interest (Emery, 1971; Owen, 1976), and the criterion for policy is not solely the adherence by the FCC, FTC, and other bodies to procedures that protect those affected directly from abuses of power but also the eventual impact on the public. There are three ways in which social and behavioral science can guide regulatory action:

1. Evaluation of existing regulatory policies. An example is a recent study that found local public affairs knowledge on the part of citizens positively related to the presence of a local television station (Lucas and Possner, 1975), thus giving some support to the FCC's policy of encouraging local television.
2. Evaluation of industry practices that might be open in some way to regulatory action. Effective regulation derives from the understanding of the outcome of existing practice, and the collection and review by the FCC and FTC of empirical data on its impact on the public is appropriate even in areas where many options may be foreclosed by statute or the First Amendment because there is no way to predict such conflict in advance of the formulation of specific policies.
3. Evaluation of the likely impact of alternative regulatory options. Behind the public appearance of regulation as specific policy lies a choosing from among many options, and the efficacy of this selection process can be enhanced by the estimates of likely outcomes that can be supplied by social and behavioral science.

The foremost bar to such applications of psychological research is lack of familiarity with it within the regulatory agencies. It can be overcome by institutional changes that bring the agencies and the scientific community into closer communication. Possible ameliorative steps include the appointment of social and behavioral scientists to

the regulatory commissions, the establishment of social and behavioral science expertise where it is now largely absent -- on the agency staffs, programs that would bring interested scientists temporarily into the agencies, and special instruction and briefing for agency personnel outside of the contentious framework of the public hearing.

THE PERSISTENT ISSUE

"Television violence," the most prominent of current issues, has been with us since the initial congressional inquiry into its possibly detrimental effects 25 years ago (U.S. Congress, 1952). There has been the extensive examination by the staff of the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence (Baker and Ball, 1969), the report of the Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior (1972) and the new research commissioned in connection with it (Comstock and Rubinstein, 1972; Murray, Rubinstein, and Comstock, 1972; Comstock and Rubinstein, 1972a; Rubinstein, Comstock, and Murray, 1972; Comstock, Rubinstein, and Murray, 1972), and numerous congressional hearings (for example, U.S. Congress, 1955, 1963, 1965, 1972, 1976). The hypothesis for which there is the most empirical support is that exposure to violent portrayals on television increases the likelihood of subsequent aggressiveness on the part of young viewers (Bandura, 1973; Berkowitz, 1962; Bogart, 1972; Chaffee, 1972; Comstock, 1972; Goranson, 1970; Krull and Watt, 1973; Liebert, Neale, and Davidson, 1973; Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior, 1972). However, the evidence does not indicate whether the actual degree of social harm is large or small (Comstock, 1976), although there certainly are instances such as the increase in airline bomb threats that followed the telecast of the Rod Serling play Doomsday Flight (Bandura, 1973) in which televised portrayals apparently have led to real-life antisocial behavior.

The potential contribution of social and behavioral science in regard to possibly harmful effects of programming is not limited to the testing of the causal hypothesis that the viewing of violence increases viewer aggressiveness. There is a much larger role.

Because of the restraints imposed by statute and the First Amendment on federal action in regard to program content (Comstock, 1977), policy in this sphere has fallen principally to the television industry. The three networks -- through their broadcast standards departments -- rule daily on the acceptability of portrayals. In the case of violence, the stipulations may bear on the use or display of weapons, the detail involved in the depiction of criminal acts, the duration of attacks, the gusto displayed by combatants, and the gruesomeness of the outcome. Although such decisions in part represent no more than the desire to avoid public displeasure, they also reflect an effort to minimize harmful effects that would be more efficacious if it were better informed. The literature of psychology provides guidance for some of these decisions, principally through experiments derived from theories of social learning, the disinhibition, instigation, and cue-facilitation of behavior, and the influence of physiological or affective arousal (Bandura, 1965; Bandura, Ross, and Ross, 1963; Berkowitz and Alioto, 1973; Berkowitz and Geen, 1966; Berkowitz and Rawlings, 1963; Feshbach, 1972; Geen and Stonner, 1972; Meyer, 1972; Rosekrans, 1967; Rosekrans and Hartup, 1967; Tannenbaum and Zillmann, 1975; Zillmann, 1971). However, at present the majority of such decisions proceed solely from intuition. Numerous questions of both practical and theoretical significance have not been explored.

A NEW HORIZON

Recent findings on television's influence on voter decisionmaking raise major questions about its contribution to the democratic process. The new data suggest that its role may be more important than early studies of mass media and politics would suggest (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet, 1948; Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee, 1954). There has been a decline in the influence of party preference on ballot choice (Dreyer, 1971; Nie, Verba, and Petrocik, 1976). This reduction in the proportion of pre-committed voters implies a reduced role for television in the reinforcing of predispositions and a greater potential for contributing more directly and emphatically to voter decisionmaking.

There is also greater potential for impact in those instances, such as the 1976 Ford-Carter election, in which there are an unusually large proportion of undecided or wavering voters open to influence during the campaign, or when political coverage becomes a media event that attracts a broader audience than that which typically follows politics.

One study of network news viewing and voting in 1976 found that such viewing appeared to contribute significantly to the reaching of a voting decision (Lucas and Adams, 1977), while another focusing on the Ford-Carter debates found that changes in decisions during the campaign were decidedly more frequent among the 40 percent who viewed the series regularly (Dennis and Chaffee, 1977; Comstock et al., in press). Yet, any optimism about the enhancement of the electoral process by television must be tempered by the findings that the viewing of television news appears to be uncorrelated with voter knowledge (Patterson and McClure, 1976; Lucas and Adams, 1977), and that such viewing is less influential than newspaper coverage in establishing the agenda of issues that voters think important (Comstock et al., in press). One plausible explanation for such evidence of ineffectuality is the preeminence television news assigns to events open to visual coverage and the relative brevity with which it dispatches any given story. What the varied findings present us with is an urgent question that psychological research can help answer: How can television news coverage -- which, by any estimate, consumes a sizable proportion of the time devoted by the nation to information about public affairs -- serve its viewers better?

ENTERTAINMENT

It has been emphasized that policymaking for television is not confined to government regulatory action, but also involves the decisionmaking within the industry, exemplified by the rulings of the broadcast standards departments. Equally important are the network programming departments which shape and schedule the entertainment that is broadcast, and the writers and producers who manufacture it.

Psychological research can also assist these parties. It can do so by enlarging our understanding of the function and influence of entertainment in the lives of people. An example is the recent research that relates such variables as mood and anxiety to the earlier viewing of specific programs (Loye, Gorney, and Steele, 1977). Certainly some television entertainment is motivated by high aesthetic and moral ambition, and probably all has behind it the desire to do no harm. Like the efforts of the broadcast standards departments, these intents at present have little to guide them except intuition. It would be silly and naive to anticipate an empirically-derived but compelling art, but it can be argued that the decisions that enter into the making of popular entertainment could conform better to the motives behind them if more were verified about the psychology of entertainment.

SOCIALIZATION

One of the most important trends in recent years in research related to television has been the increased attempt to better understand the role of the medium in the lives of the young in developmental terms. The foundations for such an approach were laid in the early, influential, and massive studies of television and children in the United States by Schramm and colleagues (Schramm, Lyle, and Parker, 1961) and in England by Himmelweit and colleagues (Himmelweit, Oppenheim, and Vince, 1958). Such a perspective is justified by changes in media consumption, in tastes, and presumably in effects as the child grows older.

It would be naive to expect that such findings will enter quickly into the thinking of television executives. Art and commerce, which merge in television, do not function so simply. The pursuit of as heterogeneous an audience as possible further restricts the likely influence on broadcasters of developmental findings. Nevertheless, we must accumulate further knowledge to permit a more informed and efficacious stance on the part of parents, teachers, and others responsible for the bringing up of children.

The typical American child spends about 27 hours per week with television. It is not enough to pose entrancing and lofty questions about what this might mean; we also need a few more answers than we now have. Over the past decades, we have heard much criticism from those who would like television to be something different. Certainly we must press for changes that we believe desirable, but we must also accept the responsibility of understanding television for what it is, and of understanding how television as it is functions in the life of a young person. Such a premise underlies Children's Television Workshop, which has recognized that show biz and pedagogy are not incompatible, and Action for Children's Television and other advocacy groups, which recognize that the television industry is susceptible to public pressure. It is a premise that should also guide research on television and child development.

The evidence is that for some topics, television typically is a more important source of information than parents or teachers (Tolley, 1973; Hollander, 1971; Chaffee, McLeod, and Atkin, 1970), but that when parents or other significant adults express a point of view it will often shape the interpretation the child gives to what he views (McLeod, Atkin, and Chaffee, 1972; Dominick and Greenberg, 1972; Tolley, 1973). It is also apparent that the long-term trend of television programming toward greater liberality of what can be portrayed reduces the control of family, school, and church over children's exposure to various topics (Comstock, 1976). These circumstances lead to two questions of high priority for psychological research: On what topics and at what ages is television most influential? In what ways might parents, teachers, and others intervene effectively in the communication that flows from the television to the child?

The consumption of television in the United States -- as measured by hours of set use per day by the average viewer -- has grown steadily over the past two decades (Comstock et al., in press), and the medium has become an increasingly central part of the American experience. We cannot stop with simply demanding that it serve us,

nor should we stop by merely accepting its wares. We must comprehend where it fails us, and how it can better sustain us. Psychological research is one means by which we can obtain the knowledge necessary to shape television to the image we seek.

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